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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews what some leading critics of public schools say about social studies curriculum and suggests implications of the growing "free schools" movement. The social studies have been charged with the socialization of children into the existing majority culture, and with teaching the knowledge and skills required for effective citizenship. Critics claim that in carrying out these charges, schools have actually deepened divisions within the society and alienated students from the culture. The "new social studies" have emphasized the ideas and methodologies of social science or have emphasized valuing skills on public issues. Free schools depart from both the older and the newer objectives. They emphasize the immediate needs and experience of the child with the goal of his self actualization. With selective enrollment in "free schools", the homogenizing effect of public school social studies will be absent. Wider variations in values can be expected. The existence of alternatives creates a pressure on public school social studies curriculum to become more present-oriented, more personalized, and more individualized. (NH)

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THE RISE OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION

By

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Much of the recent criticism of public schools concerns problems that have special import for social studies education. Two themes seem to run through this current flow of critical literature. First, public schools are isolated from the "revelant" world outside the classroom. Second, the genuine educational needs and interests of adolescents are either given inadequate attention in schools, or treated with fear and disdain.

The purpose of this paper is to review what some of the leading critics of public education are saying explicitly or implicitly about social studies curriculum, and to suggest some of the implications the "free school" movement appears to have for social studies education.

THE SOCIAL STUDIES

If we begin by reviewing what has been asked of social studies teachers before we consider what is being said about their performances we find that they have traditionally been given a difficult twofold assignment. First, they have been expected to mediate our cultural heritage in such a way that their students will want to sustain and perpetuate our most cherished patterns of living. For the most part we have wanted our schools to present the young with prepared moral judgments because as Kirk has said,

> "Any community, great or small, is knit together by belief in certain enduring norms or principles; when knowledge of those norms dwindles, the fabric of society wears out." (1 p.549)

GESTALT PRAYER

I do my thing, and you do your thing.

I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,

And you are not in this world to live up to mine.

You are you and I am I,

And if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful:

If not, it can't be helped.

Second, social studies teachers have been expected to provide their students with the knowledge and skills necessary to become effective citizens, as well as the desire to want to be. Hanvey maintains that by orienting curriculum to national interests, economic needs and political traditions based on national lines, American schools have served as agents of the state. (2) Social studies teachers have clearly played a major role in that effort.

CRITICS OF THE SOCIAL STUDIES

Some critics tell us that until recently social studies teachers have concentrated on mediating our culture and have given little more than lip service to citizenship education. According to Hanvey,

> "The most important aspect of citizenship education in American schools - admitted by everyone and by every study - is its utter emptiness and sterility." (2 p.16)

It is frequently said that social studies curriculum has been dominated by history and government courses that include as much myth as reality. Newmann feels that too often our Constitution has been portrayed as a guarantee that the needs of all citizens are being met, and that such an approach has, in his words, ". . . fostered massive public apathy." (3 p.538)

Kohl claims that social studies curriculum is "crazy," and that it neither serves the needs of the young or the needs of adult society. He feels that social studies teachers,

> ". . . teach 'objective knowledge and its corollary obedience to authority. They teach avoidance of conflict and obedience to tradition in the guise of history." (4 p.116)

Hess argues that rather than mediating our culture successfully, social studies teachers have actually contributed to the divisions that exist within our society. He claims that they have done so,

> ". . . by teaching a view of the nation and its political processes which is incomplete and simplistic, stressing values and ideals but ignoring social realities." (5 p.531)

Social studies teachers have long been criticized for looking upon their students as passive receptors to be filled with information gleaned primarily from expository textbooks, (6) but Marin carries the argument even further. He suggests that,

> "It may well be that dependence on print and abstraction is one of the devices we use to make students manipulatable, as if we meant to teach them that ideas exist in talk or on the page but rarely in activity." (7 p.70)

One final quote from Friedenberg which carries the criticism of social studies education to the extreme should be enough to bring the point home. Friedenberg claims that not only have we failed, but that,

> "It is idle to talk about civil liberties to adults who were systematically taught in adolescence that they had none; and it is sheer hypocrisy to call such people freedom-loving." (8 p.187) -Emphasis added.

THE "NEW SOCIAL STUDIES" BRING CURRICULUM REFORMS

The emergence of the "new social studies" could also be viewed as a rejection of much of what has been done in the name of social studies education. Although a definitive definition of the "new social studies" has not been formulated and agreeded upon - even by specialists within the field - it is useful here to consider its major features.

Most of what is considered "new social studies" curriculum has either come out of - or has been influenced by - one or more of the approximately 100 national social studies projects that have been developed over the past decade. In general, "new social studies" curriculum emphasizes

the ideas and methodologies of the various social sciences. The structure of the disciplines as well as the major concepts have become of major importance. strategies have been developed to engage students in various levels and types of thought processes. Interdisciplinary approaches and cross-cultural materials are also being used. More reality and awareness of conflict is brought into the curriculum by asking students to analyze pressing social issues. The discovery and inquiry methods have become the most touted methods of instruction. (9; 10)

The "new social studies" and the many projects now available could hardly be considered a monolithic curriculum, but they all seem to share a common faith in the value of the scientific approach to the study of human behavior. While rational inquiry and systematic evaluation seem to have become both the keystone and the touchstone for the "new social studies" - neither are very compatible with the philosophy and goals of the alternative schools movement. (11; 12; 13; 14)

Holt's characterization of one "new social studies" project typifies some of the major objections alternative school advocates have to the direction social studies curriclum seems to taking us. Holt claims that,

> "If the makers of one new social studies curriculum have their way, every sixth grader in the country will one day be able to say that what makes men human is that they have opposable thumbs, tools, language in which word order can influence meaning, etc. For these experts, these verbal freight cars carry an enormous load of associated meaning. For the students they will be just a few additions to their lists of what they call 'cepts' - pet phrases you put down on an exam to make a teacher think you know the course, empty of any other meaning." (15 p.13)

Less than five years ago curriculum leaders were talking about the "new social studies" revolution, classroom teachers everywhere were taking up the cause, and reformers did battle with "traditionalists" throughout the land. The revolution may not be over yet, but it seems clear that many of the foot-soldiers are deserting the ranks in search of alternatives. A new reform movement is now underway that could truly revolutionize our schools.

THE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS MOVEMENT

A variety of private schools have always been available to most parents who for some reason have not sent their children to public schools. But the alternative school of today is radically different than the military academies, the religious schools, and the prep-schools we have known. The alternative school we are now seeing is what is commonly refered to as a "free school." The alternative schools movement is essentially an effort to reverse the trend toward "scientific" curriculum as well as right all the other "wrongs" of public education.

The alternative schools movement has caught the imagination of educators at all levels. "Free schools" are springing up all over the country. Organizations like the Summerhill Society, New Schools Exchange, New Directions, and the Alternatives Foundation - as well as publications like THE BIG ROCK CANDY MOUNTAIN and THE MODERN UTOPIAN help to spread the word for the movement and recruit new followers.

Although "free schools" tend to be as different in detail as they are numerous, they all seem to share a common philosophical base. In general, the "free school" spokesmen maintain that public schools conceive of education too narrowly, that they ignore other than the cognitive dimensions of students, and that they are overly concerned with preparation for later life. Most "free school" advocates believe with Kohl that public schools,

> ". . . teach equality and democracy while castrating students and controlling teachers. Most of all they teach people to be silent about what they think and feel, and worst of all they teach people to pretend that they are saying what they think and feel." (4 p.116)

Stretch identified the genesis as well as the thrust of the movement toward "free schools" when she observed,

> "The revolt is no longer against outdated curriculums or ineffective teaching methods - the concerns of the late Fifties and early Sixties. The revolt today is against the institution itself, against the implicit assumption that learning must be imposed on children by adults, that learning is not something one does by and for oneself, but something designated by a teacher." (16 p.77)

"Free schools" are usually organized so that each student has the right and the opportunity to determine what he is to learn and when he is to learn it. "Free schools" generally operate on the premise that learning can and does take place in virtually any setting, and often student-initiated and implemented projects on any conceiveable subject comprise the entire curriculum. There are usually no fixed hierarchies of subject matter in "free schools," and few believe that there are certain common "cultural experiences" that individuals must be exposed to before they can be considered truly educated.

Proponents of "free schools" believe that each child has an intrinsic sense of beauty and appropriateness. They believe that each child will want to learn and to help others if he is placed in an environment of freedom - an environment they say is rarely available in public schools. They also feel that even under the best conditions only a fraction of the potential of any individual is ever developed and used. (17 pp.265-273; 18)

THE TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGING

The rise of the "free school" has come at a time when educators are being made painfully aware of the cultural lag under which our public schools labor. Marin warns us that,

> ". . . our institutions are geared to another century, another set of social necessities, and cannot change quickly enough to contain, receive, or direct them (adolescents) - and as we suppress or refuse them they turn to rage." (7 p.64)

Mead maintains that the findings of anthropology do not support the widely held assumption that there is general agreement about the good, the true, and the beautiful. She also maintains that we have become a prefigurative society where adults must learn from children. She says that,

> "It is not only that parents are no longer guides, but <u>there are no guides</u>, whether one seeks them in one's own country or abroad. There are no elders who know what those who have been reared within the last 20 years know about the world into which they were born." (19 p.78) - Emphasis added.

If Mead is correct then the traditional roles of teacher as cultural mediator and student as cultural assimilator are inappropriate ones to continue.

Holt also feels that youth can no longer look to adults for moral imperatives. He says that,

> "In point of fact, we are not guided, sustained, supported by the things which we claim to believe in." (15 p.191)

Marin recommends that schools everywhere be radically reconstituted to take into account the dramatic social change we are undergoing. According to Marin we need, ". . . persons of depth, warmth, daring, wit, resilence, variety and grace," and for the young this means new environments that offer, ". . . a chance to select and transform and govern (one's) own surroundings." (20 p.52)

"Free schools" are attempting to give youth the freedom Marin says they need. The approaches "free schools" are taking and the questions that are being raised as a result have serious implications for social studies education.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RISE OF "FREE SCHOOLS"

Much of what is exciting in education today is happening outside the public schools. Increasingly alternative schools have been able to employ some of the most creative people in the educational profession - to say nothing of attracting many individuals who have not considered a career in education as it is now constituted. Hardly a quarter goes by at Stanford University - and I assume at college campuses everywhere - without a course, lecture, film, etc. on alternative schools being packed with young people vitally interested in education who would not consider teaching in a public school. Many of the "free schools" across the country are staffed with dedicated volunteers who work for little or no pay. Imagine what could happen if "free schools" could offer the benefits and pay now received by public school teachers.

Goodman maintains that radio and TV have remained virtual intellectual wastelands because no serious artist wants to create material for semi-monolopies that insist on prior censorship to avoid offending any interest group, and require that their programs be aimed at the lowest common denominator to attract the widest possible audience. Curriculum developers - especially those who have sought commerical publication - face an analogous situation vis á vis the public schools. "Free schools" could open a whole new market for social studies curriculum that is now considered too controversial or too provocative for a public school audience.

One of the most frequent criticisms leveled at "free schools" is that they cater to an elite portion of our society. In most cases "free schools" attract youngsters who are bright, white, middle-class (or above),

social activists. What does this tell us about public schools? Is it the "push" of traditional curriculum - or the "pull" or radical "free school" that causes so many students to want out of our public schools? One clue may be found in the large number of students who could be considered members of the "counter-culture" who choose to attend "free schools." Roszak tell us that "counter-culture" youth are often profoundly, even fanatically, alienated from the parental generation and have rejected what he calls the "myth of objective consciousness." According to this myth the only way to gain access to reality is to cultivate a state of consciousness cleansed of all subjective distortions, and of all personal involvement. (20-A p. 208) If the majority of alternative schools are rejecting objective consciousness as a desirable mental condition, it can be safely assumed that they are rejecting the rationality of the "new social studies" as well.

If enough alternatives to public education are created to provide one to everyone who wants one we could soon lose our common ground for discourse and socialization. The public schools have always provided a homogenizing function in our society, and as Tucker points out without the common school the assumptions underlying our curriculum efforts don't make sense. (21) Tucker also warns us that the move toward alternatives in education could have serious consequences for those who remain in the public schools, as well as for the schools themselves. He feels that,

> "Today important segments are withdrawing from public schools who for the most part favor pluralism over uniformity. To the extent that public schools cannot provide increasing options the flight will accelerate. . . . Those who stay could form a relatively homogeneous group that would be unlidely to question any of the assumptions the curriculum presented." (21 p.188)

Without a cross-section of our population coming together to inquire into the social issues of our time - social studies could very well ossify into the very kind of curriculum the entire "new social studies" effort

has tried to supplant.

"Free schools" are striving for a degree of individualized instruction that is impossible with traditional textbooks and pre-packaged curriculum in general. "Free schools" also want to personalize their curriculum in ways that make national social studies projects incongruous with their very existence. Most "free school" proponents find the very idea of "teacher-proof" curriculum incredible. Holt sums up this feeling very well when he says,

> ". . . each of us has to make sense of the world in his own way, and that no two people will ever do it in the same way." (15 p.12)

"Free schools" are vitally concerned with the self-actualization of each and every child. They frequently set aside major portions of their day to attend to the personal concerns of individual students. Town meeting formats are also widely used to discuss school problems and to democratically plan courses of action. Dennison's expressed priorities are widely shared by "free school" advocates. He asks,

> "Now what is so precious about a curriculum (which no one assimilates anyway), or a schedule of classes (which piles boredom upon failure and failure upon boredom) that these things should supercede the actual needs of the child." (22 p.17)

"Free schools" are seriously challenging the need and the utility of looking to the past to understand the present. Not only is history losing popularity among the young, Mead tells us that today,

> ". . . the feeling that nothing out of the past is meaningful and workable is very much more more pervasive." (19 p.87)

"Free schools" clearly reflect the feeling Mead has identified, but Hertzberg sees a preoccupation with the "now" extending throughout our entire adolescent population. She feels that to the "now generation" - as she calls our youth,

> ". . . the past is believed to be so different as to be irrelevant." (11 p.273)

The alternative schools movement is saying in effect that all the money and effort that has been devoted to curriculum reform over the past ten years has merely amounted to impotent stopgaps, and to further confirmation that public education is not giving our young what they need - much less what they want. Times have changed since the rationales underlying the "new social studies" and the national projects were formulated. The curriculum that has been developed is largely concerned with the cognitive dimensions of students, and is designed to be used within the confines of the classroom. Students of the Seventies are demanding affective involvement in the world around them. The challenges of the social sciences, the rewards of lonely research, and the logical systematic analysis of emotionally charged social issues that comprise the agenda of social studies today is being rejected by students and young teachers alike. (11; 12)

"Free schools" are providing genuine alternatives to public education. Although the percentage of individuals involved in alternative schools is small at this time, the significance of the movement derives from the model it provides for educational change.

If social studies education is to continue as a viable part of the public school curriculum it will have to become more like the curriculum currently being offered by "free schools." Social studies will have to become more present-oriented, more personalized, and more individualized. Social studies will have to involve students in the politics of their larger communities. Social studies will have to address itself to the very things that are now considered too provocative and too controversial - and do so in ways that are presently avoided in public schools for the same two reasons. The impact of the alternative schools movements is already being felt by many social studies educators - and as the song says, THE BEST IS YET TO COME.

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